

A Look at the Subjectivist's View on Education

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Abstract

Philosophy and education are intricately related. Consequently, a myriad of problems confront philosophy and education. These problems and challenges include but are not restricted to the approaches, and issues such as the right atmosphere to learning, the values implicit in learning methods, the environment and ideology that the learner is exposed to. It is therefore incumbent on the philosopher of education to interpolate and change the principles of reality, value, and knowledge, which provide the hub on which other philosophic problems revolve to address education challenges. An examination of subjectivism as an approach or view in education would be useful in enriching philosophy of education in its search for an enduring, viable, most practical, robust, effective, pragmatic and meaningful approach to learning and knowledge acquisition. This is the major thrust of this paper.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most challenging problems of general education is the that of identifying and educating an individual learner among a crowd of learners, students, pupils etc. The reason perhaps may be located in the fact that, a class or group, is made up of various individuals with different mental, physical and psychological differences. So an individual with certain peculiarities may be lost in the crowd. This may be why the existentialist sees the individual human person as a finite and insignificant speck of protoplasm pitched against the infinite extent of the universe (Shatz, 517). This is a strong expression of the subjectivist view of humanity, and it permeates almost every facet of life, including learning.

Our topic of discourse “subjectivism” falls under the broader topic called philosophy of education. Philosophy of education is one of the new dimensions of philosophy. In this case, it is one of the numerous branches of philosophy. According to Oshita, philosophy of education “involves activities which include inquiring, speculation, application and analysis in which philosophical methods are used in the study and resolution of issues and problems in education (16).

For Egbeke Aja, philosophy of education investigates educational theories with a view to enabling teachers to know what is valid in them so as to impart them on their students (4). In line with the above, Ijiomah, looks at philosophy of education as an attempt to understand the “how”, “where” and “why” of the educational theories. This is done through analytic, synoptic, speculative and normative attempts (64).

Basically, philosophy of education looks into the background issues in education such as analysis of the different theories of education, example, the problem of equal educational opportunity, as enshrined in the National Policy on special Education, NPE (2007), the socio-political values that education should cultivate and the economic and political ideology that should determine academic curricular and the systems of education to be practiced. One of such theories and views on education is the subjectivist's theory on education. Our concern in this study is to examine this view in order that the implications on the contemporary learner and education can be exposed.

MEANING OF EDUCATION

The word education appears simple, however, it is quite a difficult exercise trying to define the term because it is a complex term denoting many things to many people. Some see education as meaning the same thing as training, instruction, etc. Accordingly, the concept of education

implies a family of ideas united by a complicated network of similarities, which naturally overlap and crisscross.

The history of modern education could be traced to ancient Greek Philosophers, such as Plato, Aristotle, and their mentor Socrates. Plato for instance sees education as the agency which can produce good citizens. Etymologically, therefore, the term education is derived from the Greek word “educare” meaning to lead out, it may also mean to form or train (Egbeke, 18). Contemporary definitions are broader and more encompassing though they take their roots from the etymological understanding of education.

Accordingly, Okafor, defines education as:

A process of accumulation through which the individual is helped to attain the development of his potentialities, and their maximum activation when necessary, according to right reason and to achieve thereby his perfect self-fulfillment (5).

Quoting Ukele, Oshita posits that “education is a process by which people are acclimatized to the culture into which they are born in order that they may advance it.” For Oshita, on his part, education constitutes an indispensable aspect of the social realities of a nation, it involves all aspects of the society from the material conditions to the cognitive and psychological states of the individual with a view to promoting knowledge (15).

It is important to note that the first (historical definition was given by Plato, thus:

By education, I mean that training which is given by suitable habits to the first instincts of virtue in children when pleasure and pain are rightly implanted in non-rational souls (Anibueze 121).

Harold’s definition agrees more with Oshita’s definition earlier mentioned. According to him, education should mean the training of individual mind with the view to helping such to maintain personal independence. It is a lifelong process aimed at benefiting the entire personality and leading to a richer life, so that men can appreciate the riches of the past and live creatively in the present and future (17).

From the above, one can see that the term education has a variety of meanings and becomes difficult to capture in one encompassing definition. This may be why Igwe, cited by Anibueze, sees education as a concept which is difficult to be fixed because of the constant’ changes in societal circumstances. Therefore, the concept of education changes with time, place and individuals (121).

THE MEANING OF SUBJECTIVISM

Subjectivism is one of the sub-theories of philosophy which describes the state of mind of an individual regarding observation of events, actions, statements, and behaviour of humans on general phenomena. According to A Dictionary of common philosophical terms, subjectivism refers to the belief that the answer to what is right and wrong is held by each individual’s personal beliefs, and that moral decisions are made by consulting one’s own conscience (50). For James Christian, it refers to the subject that experiences, as opposed to the object that is experienced. The term refers to the location of events that constitute the experiencing process-subjective - as opposed to the event that belongs to the real world (649).

Subjectivism is more or less an ethical theory that examines moral statements or pronouncements in terms of good, bad, right or wrong etc. It attempts to personalize morality. It posits that when we are talking about or making statement on moral issues, we are not talking about something objective out there, rather, we are talking about personal feelings, attitudes in terms of what pleases us. Simply put, moral utterances are not object directed but merely provide window

or means of expressing our dispositions about notions, people that appear pleasant on the one hand and repulsive on the other hand. This shows that subjectivism has a strong affinity with psychologism. This is why it is important for the student's instructor or teacher to be careful in dealing with the individual student's psychology in relation to the entire class of students. This point is buttressed by Popkin, when he says that Goodness and badness thus seem to depend upon the feelings, attitudes and desires of sentient beings, and that ultimately, what is good or bad depends upon the psychology of the person who has certain attitudes towards events, such as liking or disliking them (51).

Basically, individual students or humans suffer from this kind of disposition because they possess what Ralph Barton Perry calls "egocentric predicament" which explains the fact that it is difficult to get out of our own experience, since we are confined within a particular body system and only able to experience life only in terms of that singular system (James, Christian, 79). This position is what is known in epistemology as "epistemic loneliness." These are the issues the philosopher of education and the curriculum designer must be conscious of.

For Omoregbe subjectivism is the theory which claims that;

When we make a moral judgment about any action, we are really not saying anything or giving any information about that action itself, we are rather simply expressing our personal attitudes or feelings about the action (158).

Similarly, Ozumba, holds that subjectivism is an ethical theory according to which moral judgements are about man or their action and also judgment concerning the way people react to these men and their actions (34). For him, the problem in subjectivism centres on individual's feelings as the right ethical criteria for determining ethnically valid action or actions that are good or bad.

From the above, one can understand that subjectivism is inward looking and gives room to the individual's perception of life rather than the objective perception. In this case, reality or truth is determined by the individual, not the given or what is presented by nature. It therefore becomes necessary in educational psychology or in analyzing subjectivism as an educational theory, that the teacher or tutor must place in focus the individual perception or experience in order to arouse understanding of what is being taught or given for a meaningful and worthwhile learning.

SUBJECTIVIST'S VIEW ON EDUCATION

As we have seen above, to be subjective is to have a personal point of view. This means that it expresses the uniqueness and the individuality of the human person. This kind of mindset when addressed to problems in education, gives us the position of the subjectivist vis-a-vis educational theories, concepts, programmes, and policies. That is the way and manner in which the subjectivist views and analyzes such for the purpose of learning. Basically, the subjectivist's view on education revolves around the school curricular.

This is so because, the curriculum planner, always endorses a more subjective vision of reality and accords primacy to the existence of the individual learner, his presence and participation in a constantly changing world. The subjectivist is opposed to the rationalist and empiricist doctrines that the world is a determined, ordered system, intelligible only through reflective and contemplative observation. The learning experiences are commensurate with the learner's different types and stages of growth and development, enabling him to develop his interests, and capabilities to the achievement of his intended goals.

This means that facts or the given must not be put in a manner that they appear strange or

arouse fear in the learner, which implies that what we approximate as truth “verisimilitude” in Karl Popper’s understanding, must not be devoid of the learner’s perception and understanding of reality, meaning that, reality consists of the nature of conscious personality. This view or position is known as “subjective/personal idealism or personalism (Uduigwomen, 168). This may be why Collins and Makowsky, aver that “until we begin to notice phenomena and ask questions about them, we cannot start to check our theories against the facts or even to check our assumed facts against careful observation (2). Similarly, Ozumba in his analysis of the question of objectivity and subjectivity in social enquiry suggests that “at the level of selection of an object of inquiry, we find that our subjective feeling and interest come into play thereby exposing our value oriented bias” (72).

The subjectivist sees the best curriculum as the one that inculcates four basic skills,

- (a) Language skills
- (b) Scientific skills
- (c) Normative skills
- (d) Aesthetic skills

For him, the child has to engage in self-learning activities, while the teacher will make every effort to have positive influence on the child. The subjectivist curriculum is opposed to the traditional fashion of rigid subject divisions, rather the subjectivist goes for a curriculum that is designed to relate to the entire life of the child at home and in school. Its organization is around the activities of man kind which are of maximum value to the learner’s day to day life and participation in a culture (Arikpo, 140).

For the subjectivist, the needs of the learner vary among persons, places, and times; because the unique and inexplicable nature of man determines the behaviour of the learner. Accordingly, the learner at school strives to excel above other learners; there is also drive for a realization of the self, the starting point of the subjectivist’s philosophy. In self-awareness, the individual learner understands his own existence in terms of his own experience and situation in those activities; this is because self refers to a sense of accomplishment, development and utilization of the learners innate potentials to the full.

According to Olaitan, the subjectivist envisages a number of immediate needs which have some implications for the learner and the curriculum such as (1) physical needs, these evolve around events, circumstances and courses of action conducted by the learner for the sustenance of his own life. (2) security needs, constituted in the drive by the learner to scientifically project his mental attitudes and human behaviour into the future for protection from possible physical harm (3) social needs, involving the learner’s cultivation of a sense of belonging to and membership of a group and acceptance by members of that group and other groups. (4) Ego - needs, reflected in events, circumstances, influences and courses of action which show a sense of self-worth and self-confidence on the part of the learner (154).

Basically, the subjectivist is interested in education that takes into cognizance the fact that the child is faced always with characteristic ambitious plans, desires, and yearnings, which are over influenced by growth, development, interests and capabilities. Every learner usually selects for himself goals and the manner in which he will select and perform for himself, learning activities or experiences.

CONCLUSION

So far, we have been able to see the subjectivist’s position on education, which shows a unique

way of imparting knowledge by taking into cognizance certain basic factors, and the need to recognize the individual characteristics. The subjectivist promotes child-centred education and curriculum as well as the individual freedom of the learner.

It is important to mention that the subjectivist view on education if taken seriously could go a long way in eliminating learning obstacles common with the traditional system. Here, we find that education is both the transmission of knowledge and a process put in place to build up the creative aspects of the learner. The transmission aspects of education guarantees continuity, and the creative aspect guarantees progress of the society.

Therefore, for a useful, purposeful, result oriented, worthwhile, and free minded learner, the teacher, tutor, guardian, educational administrator and curriculum/curricular designer, it is necessary that his focus should not merely be the class, but should be conscious of the fact that the class is a composite of individuals with different minds, and should in this case make effort in creating a conducive atmosphere for the development of individual's learning abilities and to foster a relationship between the individual's peculiarities and the learning environment.

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